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### Interdisciplinarity: What's in it for Occupational Psychology?

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## Summary

Interdisciplinary work can be seen as a way to invest in the future (e.g. by linking research to innovation in our knowledge economy), suggesting Occupational Psychologists may like to revisit the concept – which is what we propose to do in our session: Firstly illustrating background terminology and debates in the area, we then discuss a study exploring the nature and prevalence of interdisciplinary content various (inter)national (occupational) psychology outlets. We conclude with implications and recommendations for practitioners and scholars wishing to develop their interdisciplinary engagement.

# **Interdisciplinarity: What's in it for Occupational Psychology?**

## **Overview**

Interdisciplinarity, defined in terms of the variety of ways of bridging and confronting the boundaries of disciplinary subject areas (Huutoniemi, Klein, Bruun & Hukkinen, 2010), is a topic of profound, long-standing importance in relation to the philosophy of science and the social construction of knowledge. In terms of investing in the future, we believe the time is ripe for those working in the field of occupational psychology (OP) to revisit the concept – after all, a better understanding of interdisciplinarity carries great value to a variety of stakeholders, given that it contributes to a clearer framing of issues such as: modes of knowledge production, education, publishing and the features of high-quality evidence-based research, as well as how to link research to economic innovation and policy impact in the knowledge economy.

Our paper and proposed session thus revisits the concept with three aims in mind. Firstly, to present a literature review clarifying some of the background terminology and debates surrounding interdisciplinarity in the social sciences, with particular reference to (occupational) psychology and management or business studies. Secondly, we discuss a study exploring the nature and prevalence of interdisciplinary content in a range of leading international psychology and OP outlets, presenting findings from our coding of all major articles and issues across the last five years. Finally, we conclude with some future implications and recommendations for practitioners and researchers wishing to develop their engagement with the concept of interdisciplinarity in the field of OP, with reference to the status of its own ‘eight areas’ of inquiry and expertise.

## **Background**

Perhaps the most important questions to ask about interdisciplinarity are also the most obvious. Do we need more of it informing our research and practice? Are most of us already doing a fair amount of interdisciplinary work? If this is so, then are we aware of how much, and in what ways, and how effectively? Although interdisciplinarity is commonly used to describe general interactions between subject areas, different terminology can appear depending on exactly how subject areas are combined; ‘multidisciplinarity’ or ‘crossdisciplinarity’ tending to refer to more detached or one-sided pooled combinations, with ‘interdisciplinarity’ and ‘transdisciplinarity’ implying more mutually complex, higher-order syntheses. There is also the issue of what exactly is borrowed from other disciplines or what arises from their being combined; this can include contextual knowledge, encyclopaedic knowledge, empirically linked relationships, methodological tools, theoretical concepts or predictions, datasets and so on (Huutoniemi et al., 2010). We would argue that, whether interdisciplinarity is inherently valuable or not, what does matter is being more explicit about our levels of integration,

practices and rationales when including or excluding multiple subject areas, fields or bodies of knowledge. This is important because doing so can optimise the processes of knowledge production in a variety of ways, including avoiding ‘reinventing the wheel’ with redundant data and concept-based jargon that has already been formulated elsewhere, and in helping find solutions to messy, multidimensional societal problems that do not neatly correspond to the specialties of a single field.

Unsurprisingly, albeit a little ironically, the literature on interdisciplinarity is itself scattered widely across disciplines, and is present in uneven amounts from one discipline to another, although work often appears most explicitly in relatively generic journals dealing with social science, economy, society, education, innovation, research funding and other areas of policy. Whilst societal issues or phenomena (e.g. globalisation, internet technologies) and philosophical or paradigmatic viewpoints (e.g. postmodernism, feminism) can provide clear talking points across subject areas, it is also institutions and historical traditions that can both help or hinder the effective production of interdisciplinary knowledge in any given instance. For example, whilst funding bodies and individual research centres may be highly encouraging of interdisciplinary endeavours, the number of attractive, high-status interdisciplinary journals or career paths is still rather low, meaningful change thus remaining punctuated, uneven and conflicted (Jacobs & Frickel, 2009).

In OP, and the field of management and organisational studies, discussions of interdisciplinarity are intermittent and fairly limited, although some key issues are raised. The ‘hype and hope’ debates of interdisciplinarity have been described, and the central problem of differing incentives to cooperation emphasised: Whilst practitioners hunger for flexible and speedy access to a broad blend of pragmatically useful knowledge areas, academics still tend to focus on commanding the respect of their peers within a narrowly single area over a prolonged period of time (Knights & Willmott, 1997). Clearly, at the academic-practitioner divide, there is a challenging tension to produce knowledge that is rigorous, relevant, evidence-based and accessible (Anderson, Herriot & Hodgkinson, 2001), although it remains an open question to what extent the appeal of interdisciplinarity can contribute to resolving some of this tension. Furthermore, for OP academics and practitioners alike, boundaries often exist for good reason, and if OP seeks to become more interdisciplinary, it is making a gamble, for whilst it may produce novel, high-impact insights, it may equally lose some of its confident legitimacy and distinctive coherence (Markóczy & Deeds, 2009; Zahra & Newy, 2009).

## **Current Study**

Our study follows on and takes inspiration from the debates illustrated above and other recent reviews of interdisciplinarity (e.g. Siedlok & Hibbert, 2013). However, we make our contribution by focusing our attention squarely on OP, and its interdisciplinary potential as a field of the ‘base’ discipline psychology, adjacent not only to (other) social sciences, pure sciences, and arts/humanities,

but also to many more neighbouring, specialised ‘sister’ fields within both psychology and business/management. As such, we are currently coding major articles across the five-year period 2009-2013, from an international (US, UK, Europe) range of outlets in OP and general psychology, including both leading journals and popular ‘trade’ magazines aimed at professional communities: *The Psychologist*, *OP Matters*, *The I-O Psychologist*, *APA Monitor on Psychology*, *Annual Review of Psychology*, *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior (forthcoming)*, *Review of General Psychology*, *Psychological Bulletin*, *Psychological Review*, *Psychological Science*, *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, *American Psychologist*, *European Psychologist*, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *Scientific American: Mind*. Articles are coded according to a range of relevant quantitative and qualitative criteria, including relevance to the eight areas of the DOP, interdisciplinary keywords used, extent of interdisciplinary integration, authors’ backgrounds, links to the BPS’ eleven psychology journal titles and special issues/high impact interdisciplinary topics (e.g. The 2012 London Olympics).

Within our session, we describe general trends of this analysis, which will be available at the time of the conference, and highlight some articles as case study examples of areas where levels of interdisciplinarity and links to OP are particularly strong and influential. We also critically pan across areas of research that obliquely concern themselves with organisational issues and are unashamedly interdisciplinary in their agendas or applications, including sensemaking, socio-technical systems, diversity science, behavioural or experimental economics/finance, neuroscientific inquiry, job design and economic sociology.

### **Conclusion: Implications for Research and Practice**

We conclude our session by discussing implications for those working in the field of OP, and corresponding future challenges and opportunities around working with the concept of interdisciplinarity. There are potential issues of university reform; making structural, cognitive, and cultural changes to higher education and the feasibility or desirability of more ‘boundaryless’ career pathways. For example, campus-wide institutes and interdisciplinary modules remain key change areas worthy of attention. Other institutions and traditions such as OP-relevant journals and the ‘eight areas’ competency framework of professional development may also benefit from interdisciplinary dialogues, evaluations, guidance and linkages. Effective changes are likely to be community-driven and incremental, with robust mechanisms for subsequent learning and wider adoption and diffusion.

We finally discuss how, as OP professionals, we are well placed to appropriate in part the topic of interdisciplinarity within our own field and practice, as a source of societal and political influence. OP could potentially act as a hub for other disciplines and a greater source of expertise on the topic itself, given that interdisciplinarity raises questions connected to inherently familiar areas of OP:

identity, boundaries, diversity, learning, creativity, power/politics, cognition and other salient concepts, such as teamworking or selection. OP academics and practitioners can play a role in developing the concept of interdisciplinarity as it operates at workplace interfaces; finding a firmer home for it amidst the language of development, careers, jobs, occupations, competencies, cultures and entrepreneurial business aspirations. Theoretically, we consider interdisciplinarity as an evidence-based criterion for guiding the future research consumption of OP practitioners; and the parsimony, reliability and validity trade-offs attached to combining diverse subject areas. Interdisciplinarity already features heavily in many workplaces and industries around the world, and will continue to shape our understandings of knowledge and (social) science in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is perhaps a more familiar or accepted term in some organisational contexts – such as academia, healthcare, business mediation and globally active family businesses – than it is in others. Yet, it is not so much *whether* you practice interdisciplinarity as it is *how* you practice it, and this is an exciting time for OP to feature more strongly in the debate; to take stock of the issues in relation to itself and the many fields and settings surrounding it.

### Session Format

- Introduction and icebreaker (sharing backgrounds and views on interdisciplinarity) – *5 minutes*
- Presentation of literature, study and implications arising – *15 minutes*
- Interactive group debates on barriers, enablers and experiences of interdisciplinarity – *15 minutes*
- Feedback from debate and concluding remarks – *5 minutes*
- *Throughout the session:* interactive text wall, a webpage delegates will be able to send text messages to, communicating their views on interdisciplinarity, texts being displayed in real time on screen

### Selected References

- Anderson, N., Herriot, P. Hodgkinson, G. (2001). The practitioner-researcher divide in Industrial, Work and Organizational (IWO) psychology: Where are we now, and where do we go from here? *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 74, 391-411.
- Jacobs, J. & Frickel, S. (2009). Interdisciplinarity: A critical assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 35, 43-65.
- Siedlok, F. & Hibbert, P. (2013, forthcoming). The organization of interdisciplinary research: Modes, drivers, and barriers. *International Journal of Management Reviews*.